

# Preparing for anniversaries and memorials

Information for secondary schools

This summary sheet aims to provide staff working with secondary school aged students affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires with information to assist in making thoughtful preparations for anniversaries and memorials related to the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

## Anniversaries and memorials

Anniversaries are times of remembering, reflection and review. As the anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires approaches there will be increased discussion in the community and in schools. Discussion of the anniversary will be welcomed by some and unwanted by others. Some students and staff might find their emotions are overwhelming and may need the school to be a 'safe haven' where they can get on with their usual routine. It is important to think carefully about the kind of anniversary activities that might be beneficial and to be mindful of the possible impacts of reflection and re-exposure for students and staff as a result of these activities.

## Preparing and supporting staff

Staff at schools with students who have been affected by the bushfires will have had a more demanding year than usual. Understanding, caring for and assisting students who have experienced a traumatic event presents staff with intense and often exhausting demands. It is important that staff look after their own physical and mental health and wellbeing and develop long-term self care strategies. Principals should consult with staff to find out how they feel about possible anniversary or memorial activities, and should respect and support individual staff decisions about being involved in any planned activities.

## Preparing students for anniversaries and memorials

Activities that focus on survivorship, safety and the progress that students, their families and schools have made since the fires are particularly beneficial. These positive anniversary or memorial activities will allow students to feel more comfortable participating and expressing their feelings. However, staff should be alert to any reactions that suggest the activity is causing anxiety. While participation in any anniversary or memorial activity should be voluntary, unexplained absences should immediately be followed up. It is important to provide meaningful alternative activities for those students who do not want to participate.

**During anniversary or memorial activities, schools can support students by:**

- **Acknowledging losses, fears and other emotions.**
- **Providing reassurance that it is normal to have strong thoughts, feelings and reactions and that there is no 'right' way to respond.**
- **Celebrating the strengths and progress of the individual student and of the school.**
- **Increasing students' knowledge about fire behaviour and fire safety and preparedness, with a particular focus around the valuable role students can play in an emergency situation.**
- **Reminding students about their coping strategies and doing some basic relaxation activities in class.**
- **Keeping an optimistic view of the future (which can help to normalise students' reactions).**
- **Utilising school welfare staff or Student Support Services Officers to support and assist students who are overwhelmed by their feelings and reactions.**

## Media

As the anniversary approaches, increased media coverage can be expected, which may reactivate feelings of fear, anxiety, loss and distress in students of all ages. Images may be strong reminders of the challenges of those weeks and the months since the bushfires and may have an impact upon some students, even those who were not directly affected by the bushfires. It is very important that parents/carers and other adults are monitoring children's exposure and reactions to media.

If schools are contacted directly by the media, they should contact the Department of Early Childhood Development's Media Unit on (03) 9637 2871 for advice and support on managing and responding to media enquiries.

## Possible reactions of students

The degree of a student's reaction will vary depending on a number of factors such as age, developmental level, experiences during the fires and recovery after the fires. Students who have experienced the death of someone close to them, the loss of their home and/or belongings or who were in close proximity to the fires may have more specific needs and need to be closely monitored and supported. Students may display increased activity levels, decreased ability to concentrate and pay attention, changes in behaviour or an increase in anxiety in the lead up to the anniversary of the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

## Suggested classroom activities

Team projects can develop a sense of shared experience and togetherness, however it is important that students are given the opportunity to participate in individual anniversary activities if they are not comfortable participating in events that have been planned for the classroom or the whole school. These activities could include students writing a letter about some of the topics below, keeping a personal journal or making a digital diary. Topics that can be used in group discussions or activities include:

- The impact of the bushfires on Victoria.
- Heroes (in the school or in the community).
- The role of the individual, the family and the community in healing.
- Mental health care needs related to the fires.

It may also be useful for students to work in small groups to identify how people have helped each other (both at school and, if they are comfortable discussing it, within their own families or friendship groups), and how their community has supported their school.

## Additional information

This summary sheet has been adapted from the Australian Child and Adolescent Trauma, Loss and Grief Network's *Understanding and Managing Anniversary Reactions: Tips for Schools Affected by Bushfires* brochure. More detailed information about anniversaries and memorial can be found in the full version of the above brochure which can be downloaded from [http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/resource\\_hubs/early\\_childhood\\_schools\\_hub/victorian\\_bushfires/](http://www.earlytraumagrief.anu.edu.au/resource_hubs/early_childhood_schools_hub/victorian_bushfires/).

Further information about supporting children through trauma, grief and loss can be found on the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's website at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/bushfires/>.

